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ABSTRACT

This report, intended for teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, community leaders, and other concerned leaders, provides a rationale for the restructuring of elementary school education and makes specific recommendations for realizing that vision. The introduction discusses the need for educational changes in light of developments in cognitive psychology , a service- and technology-driven global economy, and a diverse student population. Chapter 1 deals with the concept of the new thinking curriculum and illustrates how it can be incorporated into the four disciplines of language arts, mathematics, history-social science and science as well as character education. Chapter 2 identifies instructional practices that can be implemented in the classroom to hasten the transition to the thinking curriculum. Chapter 3 considers ways of supporting the growth of teaching as a profession to improve elementary schools. Chapter 4 focuses on development of an assessment system consistent with the new thinking curriculum. Chapter 5 emphasizes the creation of a learning environment involving students, parents and teachers in a partnership. Chapter 6 considers the physical and emotional needs of children, discussing coordination of human services to ensure the fulfillment of these needs. The last chapter addresses the role of administrators in improving the elementary schools. An appendix acknowledging the members of the Task Force is included. (BAC)

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California Elementary Grades
Task Force Report

It's Elementary!

Recommendations for Achieving Excellence in California's Elementary Schools

—Abridged Version—
Preview Edition

California Department of Education
1994

Publishing Information

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Foreword

It's Elementary! is the report of the Elementary Grades Task Force convened by the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. The report, published in 1992, reaches our schools at a time when there is great ferment in elementary education throughout California and the nation. *It's Elementary!* is intended to assist teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, community leaders, and other concerned citizens in their quest to achieve excellence for all students during some of the most critical years of public schooling.

It's Elementary! provides a road map for bringing about school restructuring. It offers a convincing rationale for legislative and policy initiatives essential to the achievement of this goal. The original document is rich with supportive research which lends credence to the various recommendations of the Elementary Grades Task Force.

It's Elementary! is also designed to assist educators in their efforts to assure powerful teaching and learning from kindergarten through grade six. The fundamental challenge identified in *It's Elementary!* is an assurance of access to a rich, meaning-centered curriculum for all students—one that causes them to think deeply about the world they are about to enter as young adults and to develop the habits of the mind that will serve them well in the 21st century.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has identified *It's Elementary!* as one of the most significant statements on the reform and restructuring of elementary education currently available in the United States. As a consequence, the Carnegie Corporation has provided a grant to the California Department of Education to enable preparation of this Abridged Version of *It's Elementary!* and to allow dissemination of the full text of the original report, as well as the Abridged Version, to an expanded national audience.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has identified It's Elementary! as one of the most significant statements on the reform and restructuring of elementary education currently available in the United States.

The Abridged Version of It's Elementary! contains additional material excerpted from the original report together with notes and comments designed to stimulate thoughtful consideration of major elementary education reform issues!

The Abridged Version of *It's Elementary!* is especially designed for lawmakers and other public policymakers. It contains the complete set of thirty-two recommendations developed by the Elementary Grades Task Force together with a brief accompanying rationale in each instance.

The Abridged Version also contains additional material excerpted from the original report designed to stimulate thoughtful consideration of major elementary education reform issues—issues which confront members of the Congress, state legislators, governors, chief state school officers, leaders of professional organizations, and those in institutions of higher education who have accountability for providing preservice and professional preparation programs for teachers and administrators.

It is our hope that readers of the Abridged Version of *It's Elementary!* will be stimulated, encouraged, and empowered to address fundamental issues affecting school policy, finance, and governance and to take bold steps forward in their efforts to assure for all elementary students a successful start on their educational journey.

William D. Dawson
Acting California State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

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California Department of Education

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California Department of Education

Introduction

The years from kindergarten through grade six are a time of uninhibited wonder, enthusiasm for learning, and breathtakingly rapid growth. The social, emotional, physical, and intellectual identities children construct for themselves during this period go far toward determining the subsequent trajectories of their lives.

The fundamental questions to be asked by educators, legislators, and other public policymakers is whether or not our schools are taking full advantage of this unique developmental window of opportunity? Are children, regardless of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic background or disability getting the best possible start in life? What constitutes excellent practice in the elementary school in light of changing conditions in modern society as well as the latest findings in research?

The purpose of *It's Elementary!* is to address these questions; to examine what an outstanding elementary school might look like; and to make specific recommendations for realizing that vision.

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The Changing School Population

Today's children bring a rich and diverse mix of experiences based upon ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to the schoolhouse door—experiences whose nuances must be recognized, appreciated and accommodated as soon as they step through that door.

More than half of California's elementary school-age children are Hispanic, African-American, or Asian. One of six students was born in another country.

Children from more than eighty different language groups who are learning English as a new language make up nearly one-third of all the students entering kindergarten in this state.

More than one-quarter of all California children live below the federal poverty level, a higher percentage than thirty-four other states. If current trends persist, one-third of the children in this state will be living in poverty by the year 2000.

In socioeconomic terms, today's children come from family structures far different than the stereotypical father-as-breadwinner, mother-as-homemaker pattern of the past. In the majority of two-parent families, both parents work. To add to this complexity, as many as sixty percent of California children may be part of a home headed by a single parent at some time before they reach the age of eighteen.

A growing economic disparity, chiefly along racial-ethnic lines, has also added to the changes in student population. While many children are coming to school with an early learning base developed in a solid preschool program, many more from low-income households are deprived of a pre-school opportunity due to in adequate public funding.

The number of students whose families receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children has increased 41.3 percent since 1988. More than one-quarter of all California children live below the federal poverty level, a higher percentage than thirty-four other states. If current trends persist, one-third of the children in this state will be living in poverty by the year 2000.

Incidences of child abuse, neglect, hunger, and homelessness have also significantly increased over the past decade. And children born addicted to drugs or alcohol—as many as fifteen percent of the total number of new babies in the state's largest cities by one estimate—are now arriving in elementary school classrooms in substantial numbers.

The cumulative effect of all these demographic factors is a dramatic increase in the number and complexity of challenges faced by teachers in today's classrooms.

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The Changing Expectations for the Elementary School

A rapidly changing society has not only brought new challenges to elementary schools, but new expectations. The primary mission of elementary education is to nurture the intellectual, physical, emotional, and moral capacities of each child to the fullest extent possible, so that each can profit from further education and ultimately acquire the knowledge, skills, and values essential to becoming a productive and happy citizen, worker, and private individual.

While that mission has remained essentially constant over the years, its meaning has changed. The service- and technology-driven global economy of the 21st century will demand a much higher level of intellectual attainment for a far greater percentage of workers than did the smokestack- and agriculture-dominated economy of the past. American business and political leaders are telling educators that the future will demand citizens who not only can read and compute, but who can also think creatively and critically while adapting readily to change.

California's changing society demands that schools produce good citizens and responsible adults. As the population becomes ever more diverse, it is crucial that schools foster a clear understanding of, and allegiance to, the principles that bind its citizens together. Part of this understanding will come from shared academic learning.

But an even greater part will come from the day-to-day example of the school as a caring community. In well-run classrooms, students absorb invaluable lessons about tolerance for others, mutual respect, cooperation, leading to the achievement of individual and team goals, and a love for learning. The internalization of such essential values as honesty, fairness, generosity, compassion, and a humane reverence for life constitutes a vital part of the schools' mission.

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The Changing View of How Children Learn

Recent advances in cognitive psychology—the science of how we learn—also have profound implications for the elementary school curriculum. The traditional grade school curriculum consisted of a hierarchical sequence of basic academic skills that students were expected to acquire, often through dogged practice. This approach reflected a view of children as empty vessels that the teacher filled up with knowledge by pouring in an agreed-on inventory of skills in an agreed-on order—from simple to complex, with the most complex "skills" of thinking and problem-solving reserved for the later years of education.

But modern cognitive research has found that children are more like natural scientists bent on making sense of the world. According to this view, all children are quite capable of sophisticated thought processes from the beginning of their formal education. *Indeed, they truly learn only when they are afforded the opportunity to actively incorporate what they are studying into their own experiences, concepts, and understandings of how the world works.*

This insight has many practical implications in the classroom. The Elementary Grades Task Force agrees with those observers who hold that the entire educational experience must be redefined in order to assure that the thinking process pervades the lives of all elementary school students in all areas of the curriculum.

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Who Is This Report For?

Taken together, the trends described in the previous sections point to an obvious conclusion. The state's elementary schools are being asked to fundamentally reinvent themselves. The process of managing this deep systemic change reaches into every part of the educational enterprise. It requires the involvement of every person with an interest in public education including teachers, students, support staff, administrators, parents, community members, business and industry leaders, representatives of higher education, members of government, as well as multiple other stakeholders.

Systemic changes of the magnitude envisioned by the Elementary Grades Task Force only take place with the blessing and support of a school district's leaders, parents, and other major stakeholders—including lawmakers and others engaged in crafting public policy.

Professionals at the school site level must be given the opportunity to digest the major ideas presented in *It's Elementary!* and to explore their application in their own classrooms. They must also have the opportunity to discuss the results of their efforts with peers and to adapt new concepts to their own teaching styles. Additionally, systemic changes of the magnitude envisioned by the Elementary Grades Task Force only take place with the blessing and support of a school district's leaders, parents, and other major stakeholders—including lawmakers and others engaged in crafting public policy.

To reach the ambitious goal of providing a rich and rigorous education for all students, a long-term effort will be required that redefines every aspect of elementary education—curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, governance, professional roles, and allocation of resources.

It's Elementary! should be viewed more as a syllabus in contrast to being seen as a final word on every topic it addresses. Teachers and all others concerned with public education are expected to use it in working their way through a critique of their own perspectives, convictions, and practices while ultimately plotting a course for classroom, school, and system-wide improvements in which they will become actively and intensely engaged.

Can We Make A Difference?

Throughout their deliberations, it became clear that the Elementary Grades Task Force members shared two beliefs about elementary education. The first was that all students can learn. The second was that good schools make a tremendous difference in ensuring that students *do* learn.

Good schools—as the Task Force learned repeatedly—make a huge difference in the lives of the children who attend them. The Task Force and the California Department of Education hope that the ideas presented here will hasten the day when all California children have access to such schools.

From an even larger perspective, the hope is that those who read *It's Elementary!* or the *Abridged Version*—including legislators and policymakers at every level of governance—will find presented a set of recommendations that have meaning far beyond California and that this meaning will be translated into laws and policies at state and national levels in ways that will have a profound impact on the lives of countless children.

The hope is that those who read It's Elementary! or the Abridged Version—including legislators and policymakers at every level of governance—will find here a set of recommendations that will be translated into laws and policies at state and national levels in ways that have a profound impact on countless children.

". . .the entire educational program must be reconceived and revitalized so that thinking pervades students' lives from kindergarten onward. . . ."

Lauren Resnik and Leopold Klopfer
Toward the Thinking Curriculum:
Current Cognitive Research.

CHAPTER 1

The Thinking Curriculum in the Elementary Years

Numerous studies of typical classroom practice suggest that elementary education in the United States could be improved significantly. In particular, the most pervasive problem afflicting much elementary instruction in the past has been a narrow focus on the acquisition of discrete academic skills—the ability to decode a word, punctuate a sentence, do long division, identify parts of a flower—to the exclusion of more thought-provoking content exploration that taps the child's real world experiences, feelings, and interests. Too often, children are fed a steady diet of teacher recitation, drill, and rote exercises instead of opportunities to solve problems and creatively express ideas and concepts.

The problem is not limited to elementary schools. The pushing down of such skill-focused academic programs into the kindergarten and preschool years and the inappropriate reliance on passive rote learning is of major concern.

The original rationale for the skills curriculum was rooted in earlier educational theory which held that students had to learn to crawl intellectually before they could learn to walk or run. But the application of the theory has been disappointing. Single-minded concentration on the mechanics of reading and mathematics, as an example, to the exclusion of how these subjects can inform and stimulate children's everyday understanding of the world, has discouraged students' interest in school.

Confronted with a dull, repetitious, and uninspiring curriculum, many children react by withdrawing into a kind of intellectual passive resistance. As recent studies have repeatedly shown, underachieving children begin to drop out mentally around the fourth grade—many years before they drop out physically.

RECOMMENDATION

1 Make a rich, meaning-centered, thinking curriculum the centerpiece of instruction for all students in all subject areas in the elementary grades.

Children are seekers of meaning. No sooner do they learn how to talk than they begin asking questions about simple things as well as about the dilemmas of human existence that have perplexed philosophers and theologians from the dawn of time. Children are intensely interested in exploring questions of values, feelings, and meaning, and the relationship of self to others. A curriculum that addresses these questions engages a child intellectually more than a skills-based one because it takes advantage of the natural curiosity and sense-making drive that motivates the child toward effortful performance.

The thinking curriculum holds that the mastery of facts and traditional academic skills are best acquired in the context of meaningful learning experiences that harness the child's inquisitive nature in response to the task at hand. Learning how to think and learning subject-matter content are not separate processes; rather, they are two facets of the same intellectual gem.

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California's subject-matter frameworks and model curriculum guides were recast in the 1980s to be consistent with current research on how children learn. Organized by core subjects, the frameworks collectively present a fundamentally new vision of what a model elementary school curriculum should include.

Qualitatively, they call for a shift from a skills-based pedagogy in which the teacher serves as the dispenser of knowledge to a hands-on, student-centered, experiential one. Quantitatively, they call for a greater depth of understanding in a wider range of knowledge areas than ever before attempted at the elementary level.

Examples of the Thinking Curriculum in Four Core Disciplines

The Thinking Curriculum in *Language Arts* for the Elementary Years

The language arts curriculum should be organized around compelling literary works. A steady diet of literature from the earliest years can provide the child with significant content through which the language competencies of listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be developed in an integrated and meaning-centered fashion.

In the primary grades, one of the key responsibilities of schools is to teach children how to read and write; in the intermediate grades, it is to help children gain fluency and confidence in reading and writing so that they have the skills to learn through written communication whether in the form of texts, original source materials, reference works, or other forms of data. Each of these responsibilities—that is, teaching reading and writing—poses a special set of challenges.

Good elementary reading programs recognize that reading is not a subject in itself so much as it is a tool of discovery that students can use to enter enticing new worlds. Skill in reading is acquired and perfected by practicing it across the curriculum—in mathematics, history-social sciences, and science. In those subject areas, the emphasis in reading is kept where it belongs—on reading for meaning—rather than on the mechanics of the operation.

The best language arts programs sustain an atmosphere in which reading is perceived as a joyful experience. Using texts rich with interesting ideas and information, moving through them at an appropriate pace, and arranging for high rates of success can all help attain the ultimate goal: the development of lifelong readers.

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The Thinking Curriculum in *Mathematics* for the Elementary Years

Mathematics as commonly presented in today's elementary schools has been described as a "curriculum out of balance." Researchers point to a heavy emphasis on rote mastery of computational skills on the one hand and scant attention to creatively exploring mathematical concepts derived from the child's everyday experiences on the other. In sharp contrast with other countries, a large portion of the elementary mathematics curriculum in the United States during every year after kindergarten is little more than a rehash of material previously covered.

In exemplary mathematics programs, students are given opportunities to construct their own mathematical understandings from open-ended encounters with challenging instructional situations. They frequently work together, sharing numerical estimates and discussing their ideas about how to find answers. Students explain their thinking, orally and in writing, and build their understanding of mathematics over a long period of time.

In exemplary mathematics programs, students are given opportunities to construct their own mathematical understandings from open-ended encounters with challenging instructional situations. Students choose hand calculators, manipulatives, or other tools to use while they work. They frequently work together, sharing numerical estimates and discussing their ideas about how to find answers. Students explain their thinking, orally and in writing, and build their understanding of mathematics over a long period of time.

Most students establish their lifelong attitudes towards mathematics in the elementary grades. All too often, initial positive attitudes plummet by the time students reach sixth grade. This trend represents a loss of talent that neither California or the nation can ill afford. Many scientific and business careers require a solid foundation in mathematics. It is particularly important that females, black, and Hispanic students become comfortable at an early age with the full range of thinking in mathematics so that they will not be excluded later from the many opportunities that mathematical power affords.

The key to improvement lies in changing the elementary mathematics curriculum—from one that emphasizes correctly following procedures to arrive at the "right" answer—to one that presents mathematics as a way to explore and gain control over situations in the real world.

The Thinking Curriculum in *History-Social Science* for the Elementary Years

A strong history-social science program at the elementary level helps all students to develop their full potential for personal, civic, and vocational pursuits throughout life. The elementary curriculum is centered in a core of historical and geographical knowledge, integrating the social sciences and humanities, with an emphasis on ethics and democratic values. It helps students to better understand themselves and others and to develop judgment, perception, civic pride, and personal responsibility.

A variety of materials, resources, primary sources, strategies, and technologies are used to engage students. This variety fosters enjoyment of history, cultivating historical empathy for and a knowledge of men, women, and children of different times, places, and cultures. Much of the literature used to enhance history studies in kindergarten through grade six should emphasize heroes, adventure, moral challenges, faraway places, and distant times so that students' imaginations are captivated, broadening the perspective they have on their nation and the world and inspiring them through examples of ethical behavior.

The elementary program contains opportunities for interdisciplinary studies, enriched with primary sources, varied genres of literature—both of the period and about the period—and the visual and performing arts.

Throughout the grades, the program engenders those "habits of mind" unique to history-social science. Among these are an understanding of events over time, providing students with examples from human experience; a deeper understanding of change and continuity, including the values and problems inherent in both; a keener examination of human action, beliefs, ideas, issues, and ways of life; a firmer grasp of the democratic heritage on which our multiethnic nation is founded; and a beginning understanding of the common ideals embodied in rights, responsibilities, and the historic struggle to achieve equality and freedom for all.

Much of the literature used to enhance history studies in kindergarten through grade six should emphasize heroes and heroines, adventure, moral challenges, faraway places, and distant times so that students' imaginations are captivated, broadening the perspective they have on their nation and the world and inspiring them through examples of ethical behavior.

The Thinking Curriculum in *Science* for the Elementary Years

Science is a way of thinking, of approaching problems objectively by theorizing about what might be from careful observation of what is, and then testing the hypothesis. Science in the elementary grades should help all students learn how to think as scientists think, even as they become familiar with the laws and principles that govern the natural world.

A conviction exists among some observers that elementary students are too young to understand scientific reasoning, but nothing could be further from the truth. From the time they can walk and talk, children ask questions about cause and effect; about what makes things happen. In that respect they are the original natural scientists, constantly engaged in sense-making activity.

A conviction exists among some observers that elementary students are too young to understand scientific reasoning, but nothing could be further from the truth. From the time they can walk and talk, children ask questions about cause and effect; about what makes things happen. In that respect they are the original natural scientists, constantly engaged in sense-making activity.

Children come to the classroom with many intuitive, everyday ways of explaining natural phenomena. Experiential science succeeds when it causes students to abandon misconceptions and embrace scientifically valid principles. Consistent with modern learning theory, research shows that students who have the power to control some aspect of an experiment are much more likely to become fully engaged interpreting the outcome than those who are simply asked to follow a protocol.

The best "hands-on" science activities must also be the best "minds-on" activities. Traditional cookbook experiments are insufficient to lead students to new understandings if their interests and intellects fail to become simultaneously engaged.

Character Education and the Thinking Curriculum

Character education is an essential part of the elementary school's mission. It differs from other aspects of the thinking curriculum in significant ways, however. For one thing, it is not a separate domain within the curriculum but rather a vital strand running through each of the subject areas. For another, it is not a purely cerebral endeavor. Its goal is not simply to teach children about morality; it is to persuade and inspire them to be moral—to understand in their minds, embrace in their hearts, and act in their daily lives according to a pro-social set of values.

Character education takes place through both explicit and implicit means. Explicitly, the thinking curriculum in literature, science, history, and other disciplines offers abundant opportunities to explore the moral dimensions of human behavior and inspire virtuous conduct.

The great questions facing individuals and the human race are moral questions, and children, as seekers of meaning, are naturally drawn to thinking about and discussing them and how they bear on their own lives. Pro-social values are also encouraged implicitly—through the example of the school as a caring community. Everything that happens at school is a message to children about what the adult world values and truly holds important.

Character education is not the sole responsibility of the schools. The primary influence on a child's moral formation is, and will always remain, what happens at home. The point is, however, that parents need—and expect—all the support they can get in helping children become moral.

Out of twenty-five possibilities listed in the Gallup Poll's annual survey of attitudes toward education in the United States, the second highest show of approval generally is

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accorded the following goals for the public schools: "To develop standards of what is right and wrong." (Only the classic academic mission, "To develop the ability to speak and write correctly," consistently scores higher.)

Beginning in the elementary years, schools have a special obligation to encourage children to adopt as their own the highest ethical standards of the community.

CHAPTER 2

In the Classroom

The core elementary curriculum contains a wealth of ideas, insights, and powerful ways of knowing the world. All students deserve and must be provided with solid preparation for future schooling and success in their adult lives that such a curriculum promises.

The Elementary Grades Task Force learned during the preparation of its report that while the great majority of teachers embrace the philosophy of the thinking curriculum as embedded in the *California Curriculum Frameworks,* they feel overwhelmed by the demands of curricular change. After all, middle school and high school teachers working within an academic discipline can concentrate on implementing powerful curriculum in one content area. But elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms are faced with making significant changes in what they teach and how they teach it across the board.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some measure of relief to teachers by identifying practical steps that can be taken in the classroom to speed the transition to the thinking curriculum.

Recommendations of the Task Force for improving instructional practices are presented here in three abridged sections. The first two correspond to the questions skeptics ask most frequently about implementing the thinking curriculum. First, how will elementary teachers be able to implement such an ambitious program? And second, how can they serve an increasingly diverse student population while doing so? The third section focuses on the promise of technology in helping to support the thinking curriculum.

SECTION ONE

Fitting It All In

Teachers and elementary schools committed to making the transition to a rich, meaning-centered thinking curriculum for all their students can budget their instructional time and gain better control of the change process by taking the steps proposed in recommendations 2 through 7.

Each of California's new generation of curriculum frameworks is based on a consistent philosophy of how children learn. Each calls for instructional strategies that involve students as active, engaged participants in their own learnings. In a very real sense, then, to master one framework is to gain insight into them all.

RECOMMENDATION

2 Begin curricular reform by mastering a single subject area.

Teachers who are accustomed to using a skills-based curriculum should not be expected to shift overnight to one based on discovery. The best way to begin teaching the thinking curriculum is to focus efforts on one area of the curriculum. A teacher can study the appropriate framework, attend a summer staff development institute, or find a colleague who already has and can act as an informal adviser. Then, the teacher can begin trying out lessons consistent with the principles found in the framework. Because mathematics and language arts are central to the elementary curriculum, either one can provide a logical place to start. But any subject area can be considered because each of California's new generation of frameworks is based on a consistent philosophy of how children learn. Each calls for instructional strategies that involve students as active, engaged participants in their own learnings. In a very real sense, then, to master one framework is to gain insight into them all.

RECOMMENDATION

3 Reduce the amount of time spent on skill-based activities.

The thinking curriculum is not an add-on to the traditional curriculum. Rather, it represents a completely new approach in which less effective and time-consuming instructional practices are replaced by those which

are far more stimulating. For example, daily spelling lessons from the traditional spelling book, organized around the tenuous rules of English spelling, can be eliminated in favor of more opportunities for writing in which students learn to spell the words they need to communicate their ideas. Similarly, time given to acquiring speed and skill in doing mathematical computations can be decreased in favor of giving students more time to solve real mathematical problems in which numbers are handled in context.

RECOMMENDATION

4 Choose depth over coverage in teaching a subject.

Realistically, teaching a meaning-centered curriculum presupposes that the number of topics that are addressed in any given subject area is likely to decrease. The reason is simple. Providing learning experiences in which the understanding of concepts is the goal takes more time than passing along bits and pieces of information.

For example, it takes longer for students to develop an intriguing question in science, to design an experiment to find unknown answers, to puzzle through the meaning of raw data, and to reconcile the findings with their original beliefs than it does to read a textbook and answer the ever-present questions at the end of the chapter.

On the other hand, activity-based instruction also gives students a vastly more robust insight into how science works. And it provides "learnings" that students are far more likely to retain. There will always be a need to balance the competing claims of depth versus breadth of coverage in any subject area. But experience shows and the advice of the Task Force is clear, *less is more!*

Provision of fewer but more profound learning experiences is clearly consistent with the notion of a thinking curriculum.

There will always be a need to balance the competing claims of depth versus breadth of coverage in any subject area. But experience shows, and the advice of the Task Force is clear, less is more! Provision of fewer but more profound learning experiences is clearly consistent with a thinking curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION

5 Schedule class work in longer blocks of time.

A thinking curriculum in which students gain deep understandings requires changes in the way time is scheduled in the elementary schools. Longer blocks of time are required in many instances. For example, forty-five minutes is seldom sufficient to allow students to identify a problem, look for patterns, play with competing solutions, and write up a comprehensive explanation in mathematics. Equally, an hour is insufficient time to write and publish a class newsletter. Many other examples exist.

Good interdisciplinary instruction has a place in the thinking curriculum. To carry it off successfully, however, teachers need to have a clear vision of what they are trying to accomplish in each content area during a particular day, week, month, or throughout the school year in order to protect the rigor and integrity of individual subject areas.

A natural consequence of pursuing authentic learning tasks over a longer period of time is to dissolve the rigid distinctions between subject areas. Good interdisciplinary instruction has a place in the thinking curriculum. To carry it off successfully, however, teachers need to have a clear vision of what they are trying to accomplish in each content area during a particular day, week, month, or throughout the school year in order to protect the rigor and integrity of individual subject areas.

As a bridge into the interdisciplinary curriculum, teachers may create two discipline units in naturally related subjects such as mathematics and science or history-social science and the arts. Integrated units have the added capacity to sanction class work that requires longer blocks of time—enough time for students to achieve the more time consuming goals associated with the thinking curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION

6 Team teach and specialize, especially in the upper elementary grades.

Even under the best of circumstances, elementary teachers will find themselves frustrated in trying to deliver the thinking curriculum unless they start with a solid working knowledge of the subject areas they are charged with helping students explore. However, schools can fol-

low certain proven methods for taking advantage of the individual and collective strengths of their staff members. These may include various kinds of team teaching and specialization including but not limited to: (1) division of subject area domains at each grade level based upon responsible assessments of individual teacher abilities, experiences, and interests; and (2) designation of "lead teachers" in each subject area at each grade level who assume special responsibility for keeping abreast of the latest breakthroughs in a given discipline. This information is shared with colleagues through various means as teachers plan and implement new instructional approaches in their classrooms. A variety of other means may also be employed.

In kindergarten through grade three, younger children need the reassurance of a homeroom teacher who is present with a group of children throughout most or all of the school day. In grades four through six, however, more flexibility is possible as various forms of teacher specialization are implemented. The fundamental issue in determining teacher specialization is to lead from strength—to divide workloads so that teachers are enabled to spend their time in those subject areas where they enjoy teaching and in which they feel the most competent.

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RECOMMENDATION

7 Extend the learning day with homework assignments consistent with the thinking curriculum.

Homework is an effective and inexpensive way to increase instructional time and to help teachers working with the thinking curriculum "fit it all in." As has traditionally been the case, skills that are necessary for academic achievement may be practiced away from school. This use of homework frees up classroom time for other activities. However, the thinking curriculum encourages a new view of homework. Out-of-class assignments can ask students to prepare for upcoming lessons by gathering data or doing background reading. Or a culminating activity in which students are expected to integrate skills and understandings in the creation of a piece of work might be assigned.

While schools can count on most caregivers to eagerly support a well-conceived homework program, socioeconomic pressures have resulted in an increasing number of children who no longer enjoy this advantage. In those instances, the proper response is not to give up on the idea of homework; rather, it is to set up alternative programs to foster after-class involvement—through the formation of peer study groups; community homework centers staffed with other students, community volunteers, parents, and educators; and through homework call-in lines.

SECTION TWO

Taking Advantage of Diversity

All children can learn and, more specifically, all can benefit from participating in a powerful thinking curriculum that energizes all segments of the student population. Too often, the so-called "risk factors" become self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. The fact is, the quality of the instructional program and expectations of the staff influence mightily a child's learning.

The seeds of success or failure in school are planted early. By the third or fourth grade, it is possible to forecast with disconcerting accuracy which students will move successfully through the remainder of their public education and which ones will drop out before earning their high school diploma. Past realities need not dictate future trends, however. All children can learn and, more specifically, all can benefit from participating in a powerful thinking curriculum that energizes all segments of the student population.

Numerous schools in California and in other parts of the nation have had outstanding success working with students who, according to conventional wisdom, should not have fared well in their education. Too often, the so-called "risk factors" become self-fulfilling prophecies of failure: low income, limited-English-proficiency, minority status, learning disabilities, low parent educational levels, poor attendance, family upheaval, early reading difficulties, and so on. The fact is, the quality of the instructional program and expectations of the staff influence mightily a child's learning.

The purpose of Section Two of *It's Elementary!* is to identify instructional practices that help insure the success of all children.

RECOMMENDATION

8 Use a variety of grouping strategies.

The use of a variety of classroom grouping strategies helps guarantee that all students gain access to a rich, meaning-centered curriculum. Specifically, in the course of any given day, a student should move through a succession of work constellations designed by the teacher for whole class, individual, and small group settings. The particular grouping strategy used at any given moment will depend on the specific learning goal at hand.

There are many activities for which the whole group setting is an appropriate instructional choice—"setting the table" for small group or individual activities, consensus-building in the class, and conducting summary discussions, among multiple other examples. Even a critical function of the teacher—making public the thinking processes that an expert uses in reading a text, writing an essay, solving a problem in any discipline—can be usefully carried out in the whole class setting.

Small groups, because they multiply the opportunities for students to take control of their own "learnings," are a natural fit with the thinking curriculum. They can be organized to fit into a number of criteria and to serve a number of purposes.

The grouping of students of similar academic abilities remains too common in many elementary schools. Unfortunately, the dangers arising from an over reliance on ability grouping are manifold. The practice tends to breed a culture of failure among students placed in low-achieving groups. The problem is widespread. Even well-regarded schools make the mistake of withholding a rigorous curriculum from students stuck in low-ability groups.

The Elementary Grades Task Force says "stay flexible" by using the grouping strategy best suited to the learning goal at hand—and keep it temporary. Ability grouping in limited doses is an acceptable practice, but it must be the exception in the child's instructional day, not the rule!

The dangers arising from an over reliance on ability grouping are manifold. The practice tends to breed a culture of failure among students placed in low-achieving groups. The problem is widespread. Even well-regarded schools make the mistake of withholding a rigorous curriculum from students stuck in low-ability groups.

RECOMMENDATION

9 Provide more collaborative learning opportunities.

Children of different academic levels often derive benefits from working together in small groups to reach common learning goals. This model for organizing children for classroom activities, known as cooperative or collaborative learning, has certain inherent advantages over simply having students work in groups. It more closely resembles how humans work in the real world and, therefore, promotes the development of social skills.

Why does collaborative learning work? Students benefit from their involvement in well-run collaborative groups because they can watch—and learn from—the way classmates attack new learning tasks. Each child brings a unique set of experiences, perspectives, and world views to the collaborative learning group that can both enrich and be enriched by contact with others.

Why does collaborative learning work? Students benefit from their involvement in well-run collaborative groups because they can watch—and learn from—the way classmates attack new learning tasks. Each child brings a unique set of experiences, perspectives, and world views to the collaborative learning group that can both enrich and be enriched by contact with others.

Students must be taught the skills of cooperative learning behaviors—they are not innate. Cooperative learning activities supplement other types of instructional practice. When properly conceived and implemented, cooperative learning fosters pro-social values. By sharing materials, taking turns, or deciding how to settle differences of opinion, children learn the importance of fairness. By listening to the person talking or learning how to make suggestions, they show responsibility by putting forth effort for the good of the group.

RECOMMENDATION

10 Intervene early to prevent learning problems, especially in reading fluency.

The indispensable link in a prevention-oriented strategy of helping students before they acquire a self-image of academic failure is an aggressive program of literacy promotion. Reading is fundamental to most academic learning. Not surprisingly, the ability to read is highly predictive of future school success. In fact, a child's reading fluency at the third grade level gives a more

accurate forecast of whether he or she will drop out or graduate from high school than any other indicator!

The goal of an early intervention reading program is to build the child's confidence in being able to read independently. Thus in practice sessions, self-correction rather than a teacher's correction is emphasized. The student is always the active performer in each learning encounter. Through careful coaching, the teacher models and reinforces assumptions about the text while using an array of strategies for eliciting meaning when the child gets stuck.

Early intervention programs in reading are expensive in the short run, but they are cost-effective in the long run because they work—and keep working. Research studies show that once "slow" students gain a grip on how to read for meaning the vast majority never need reading remediation again. Besides, they are able to continue profiting from regular classroom instruction—at major cumulative system-wide savings in time, money, and resources.

Investing in the primary years in making sure every student learns how to read is ultimately both kinder and less expensive than sponsoring a parallel track for failing students in the intermediate, middle grade, and high school years.

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RECOMMENDATION

11 Develop an academic support network to ensure that all students acquire important learnings the first time around.

Good teachers are sensitive to differences in the rates at which children learn. They find ways to make sure their students receive the extra attention and time on task that the learning processes may require. Examples of strategies which can be funded through Chapter 1 or other categorical resources include: staggering the school day to allow some students to arrive or leave before others thus allowing pupil-teacher ratios to be reduced during a part of the school day; implementation of intersession classes in schools on year-round schedules; voluntary community tutoring programs; and the extension of instructional

time to include before and after school sessions, and Saturday school.

Special attention is called to the fact that children can teach each other, too. Homework cooperatives provide opportunities for students to coach one another through difficult assignments. Peer tutoring and cross-age tutoring programs generate mutually beneficial experiences for children on both sides of the learning equation.

RECOMMENDATION

12 Use categorical resources to support the thinking curriculum.

Categorical programs were created to give help toward mastery of the core-curriculum to children of poverty, the gifted and talented, the limited-English-proficient, and others with exceptional learning needs, abilities, or requirements. The central weakness of unsuccessful categorical programs was that they frequently shortchanged their students. As the number and scope of categorical programs increased, many districts realized they no longer had a core curriculum, but rather, any number of stand-alone alternatives.

The key to helping children with special learning needs prosper in school is to have categorical funds support the core curriculum rather than pay for intellectually impoverished alternatives. Although specific requirements pertaining to the use of categorical funds need to be observed, new flexibilities in the laws encourage and reward schools for using innovative strategies that hold the promise of educational success for all students.

This policy implies a bold departure from the way things have long been done. Many school leaders believe they have no money to pay for school improvement strategies because the discretionary funds associated with categorical programs are spent on staff salaries before the school year begins. The solution is to have fewer categorical staff and more investment in systemic improvement.

Many school leaders believe they have no money to pay for school improvement strategies because discretionary funds associated with categorical programs are spent on staff salaries before the school year begins. The solution is to have fewer categorical staff and more investment in systemic improvement.

RECOMMENDATION

13 Ensure that limited-English-proficient (LEP) students have access to the thinking curriculum.

Elementary schools must find more effective ways to deliver the thinking curriculum to the large and growing population of limited-English-proficient students. In those cases where large numbers of LEP students have the same home language, the Elementary Grades Task Force recommends that classes be conducted in the LEP child's home language. This includes classes of instruction in initial literacy. Learning to read in the home language is the fastest and most efficient way the LEP child can acquire English reading skills because children efficiently transfer to the second language the underlying principles of literacy they learn in their home language.

However, many of our elementary schools enroll only a few LEP students or several LEP students from different language groups. Providing home-language instruction in these instances is often difficult. Nonetheless, schools have the responsibility of making sure that LEP students have access to a rich instructional program. This can happen through modifying the way English is used in the classroom, grouping students to ensure that LEP pupils have access to bilingual peers, making available home language instructional materials, and connecting instruction to student's life experiences.

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RECOMMENDATION

14 Avoid grade-level retention as an instructional strategy.

Extensive research into the downstream consequences of grade-level retention clearly demonstrate that it is educationally counterproductive. Not only do children who are retained show lower self-esteem and poorer attitudes toward school than matched classmates who were promoted, but also they do less well academically after the experience, which is the crucial point in discrediting the retention strategy. Retention worsens rather than improves student achievement.

SECTION THREE

Technology and the Thinking Curriculum

Modern teaching tools go well beyond chalkboard and chalk. They include desktop computers, videocassette recorders, camcorders, laser disk players, overhead projectors with liquid crystal displays, and large screen monitors, to name only a few. School districts that support the purchase of such equipment and teachers who put high-tech devices to work deepening their students' conceptual understandings will find it easier to reach their ambitious educational goals.

Technology is a tool for improving curriculum and instruction, not an end in itself. Teachers must be careful as they select technology-based materials to ensure that the materials remain consistent with the precepts of the thinking curriculum. A software program which emphasizes multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank responses is no better on a computer screen than on a ditto sheet.

RECOMMENDATION

15 Invest shrewdly in technology to help promote the thinking curriculum.

Electronic knowledge processing and retrieval systems and related educational software can amplify the elementary teacher's instructional capabilities in myriad ways. The computer can serve as a valuable classroom management aid in handling such chores as attendance and recordkeeping. In some districts, teachers are using the computer's networking capabilities to set up electronic bulletin boards that serve as a resource bank and as a tool for curriculum planning. The computer can also help in sensitive diagnostic applications. For example, computers can save early drafts of writing assignments as students work toward a finished product. The record thus created can be used to analyze significant work and to assist in mapping a course for future learning.

However, technology is a tool for improving curriculum and instruction, not an end in itself. Teachers must be careful as they select technology-based materials to ensure that the materials remain consistent with the precepts of the thinking curriculum. A software program which emphasizes multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank responses is no better on a computer screen than on a ditto sheet.

CHAPTER 3

All in the Profession

Changing the curriculum is easy to do—on paper. The most important thing that counts in improving elementary education, however, is what happens once the classroom door closes and the school day begins. A fundamental goal of the thinking curriculum is to make school a child-centered place where the student is consistently encouraged to play an active role in his or her own learning. In order to accomplish this end, the reform strategies themselves must be teacher-centered. This reflects the reality that the elementary teacher more than anyone else decides what takes place in the classroom.

Chapter Three focuses on the pivotal proposition that supporting the growth of teaching as a profession is the most direct route to improving California's elementary schools—and others throughout the rest of the nation.

The Elementary Grades Task Force's discussion and recommendations in this area fall into two main categories: how best to support change among the present cadre of elementary teachers and how to improve the recruitment and induction of new teachers into the profession.

SECTION ONE

Supporting Professional Growth

There are over 130,000 elementary teachers in California's public schools. The majority will remain in the classroom until they retire. Clearly, if a meaning-centered curriculum is to become a reality in the classroom over the next decade—instead of just another educational reform pipe dream—then elementary teachers now in the system must become that curriculum's foremost advocates and practitioners.

RECOMMENDATION

16 Provide teachers access to the best thinking about curriculum and instructional practices.

Teaching to stimulate children's interest rather than assigning chapters to be read and doling out workbook exercises to be completed eats up a teacher's inventory of new ideas and resources at a voracious clip. Teachers who have attempted to make the thinking curriculum a reality in their classrooms report feeling the need for more preparation time, more help from their peers, and more subject-matter knowledge.

An infrastructure of Subject-Matter Projects was developed in the core areas of the curriculum which provides opportunities for teachers to attend staff development institutes of two to three weeks' duration intensively focused on the latest ideas in different disciplines and their classroom applications.

The futility of one-shot staff development programs became apparent in California during the 1980s and an effort was mounted to devise a more effective professional development alternative. An infrastructure of Subject Matter Projects was developed in the core areas of the curriculum which provides opportunities for teachers to work with other teachers in intensive, long-term explorations of curriculum and instruction in specific disciplines.

Participants in the Subject Matter Projects not only become better teachers in their own classrooms, they have also proven to be valuable resources for fellow faculty members at their schools, and many have become agents for curriculum improvement at the district, regional, and state levels.

Finally, it should be remembered that some of the most effective professional development activities involve just plain reading—keeping abreast of the top journals, newsletters, and selected literature in the education field. Schools and districts can encourage this practice through the cost-effective strategy of keeping teachers' libraries well stocked with topical research papers. Teachers can promote the process themselves by forming professional study groups to discuss books of mutual interest and share insights about the current literature.

RECOMMENDATION

17 Make sure that teachers have adequate scheduled time for working together in professional collaborations at the school site.

The changes implied by the thinking curriculum ought not and, ultimately, cannot be forced on school personnel. Teachers need and deserve the autonomy to choose and enact changes on the basis of their individual and collective judgment. Specifically, it requires that teachers have more time for professional development, including time for long-range planning, for discussing instructional problems, and for reflecting on their own teaching.

Several cost-conscious policy choices are available to schools and school districts to make time for professional development. These include (1) better utilization of the eight staff development days provided for California teachers under AB 777, the School-Based Coordination Act. A judicious use of this time might include provision of one complete day a month for teachers to work together with colleagues on practical questions of application. Such a self-designed program would have several advantages. It would provide greater continuity in the staff development effort over the school year, and it would improve the probability that instructional issues of primary importance to the school site would be addressed; (2) more creative use of categorical funds in which schools reexamine how they spend categorical funds, with an eye toward buying teachers released time to visit one-another's classes or schools. The Elementary Grades Task Force concurs with the proposition that districts and schools should earmark twenty-five percent of all cate-

Sharing at least one preparation period a week is necessary to allow teachers to engage in on-going conversations about curriculum, the needs of individual students, and the best way to coordinate resources. To this end, schools should consider using their School Improvement Program or Chapter 1 funds to provide released time for teachers to engage in curriculum development and grade-level planning.

gorical funds for a variety of professional developm activities; (3) accumulation of blocks of time in which schools accrue small increments of instructional time daily by extending the school day. The "surplus" time thus generated is expended in bigger blocks for professional development purposes; and (4) other creative strategies—limited only by contractual or other legal constraints and the imaginations of professional staff.

RECOMMENDATION

18 Support teacher professionalism with a classroom supply budget, secretarial help, and a well-equipped workplace.

Elementary teachers are often hindered from carrying out their educational mission by an assortment of obstacles that would be unimaginable for a comparably skilled worker in the business sector. These handicaps to productivity include cramped or non-existent work space at the school; a lack of access to basic technological aids; and a perennial shortage of classroom materials.

At a minimum, teachers should be supported at the school site in a manner befitting their professional status by providing them with a quiet office space; a comfortable faculty commons area in which to exchange ideas with peers; access to a telephone, word-processor or computer, copying machines, and other technology; and on-call secretarial help. Teachers should also have at their disposal a discretionary budget for purchasing classroom supplies and supplementary instructional materials.

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SECTION TWO

Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

Student enrollments are soaring. If California's already high pupil-teacher ratio remains constant—instead of being lowered as would be advisable—districts in the state will need to hire 37,500 new elementary teachers during the first half of the 1990s.

RECOMMENDATION

19 Aggressively recruit teachers from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds.

Meeting the demand for new teachers with talented, committed, and knowledgeable recruits poses a number of challenges. Among the most significant is creation of an educational work force that more accurately reflects the ethnic make-up of the student population.

Several initiatives to begin achieving greater demographic parity in school faculties have been undertaken. They include strategies to identify minority students as early as the middle grades and high school and encourage them to consider teaching as a career. Some school districts are also offering incentives for instructional aides to complete their college credits and become teachers. This is an especially valuable approach to recruiting bilingual teachers.

The Elementary Grades Task Force emphasizes the urgency of such efforts in order to achieve a pool of teachers reflective of the state's demography and sufficient to meet present and future professional needs.

Several initiatives to begin achieving greater demographic parity in school faculties have been undertaken. They include strategies to identify minority students as early as the middle grades and high school and encourage them to consider teaching as a career.

RECOMMENDATION

20 Support new teachers.

Traditionally, new teachers are given the teaching assignments no one else wants, a set of classroom keys, and a wide berth. "Young teachers are often forced

The California New Teacher Project (CNTP), which includes thirty-seven different pilot programs around the state affecting 1,900 new teachers thus far, is replacing the old "sink or swim" mentality of teacher induction.

to search on their own for survival tactics once they are on the job," the report of the California Commission on the Teaching Profession noted in 1985. While this situation still prevails in many cases, a pilot program to help beginning teachers during the first critical year of on-the-job experience—when typically, the highest attrition in their numbers takes place—is showing remarkable results.

The California New Teacher Project (CNTP), which includes thirty-seven different pilot programs around the state affecting 1,900 new teachers thus far, is replacing the old "sink or swim" mentality of teacher induction with a broadly supportive one. New teachers in the various pilot projects have shown a ninety-five percent return rate to teaching in their second year—compared with a seventy percent return rate for new teachers statewide.

CHAPTER 4

Measures for Success

A basic rule of education is that "what you test is what you get." The explanation for this phenomenon is rooted in human nature. When teachers and administrators know their professional competence is going to be judged on the basis of how well their students perform on a given test, they naturally tend to concentrate on preparing their students to excel on that type of test—whatever lofty sentiments the curriculum frameworks or the school's mission statement may espouse.

The problem with many assessment instruments used at the elementary school level is that they still reinforce the old skills-based curriculum. Multiple-choice tests that require students to fill in bubbles on machine-graded answer sheets have tended to put a premium on rudimentary academic skills—the ability to spell correctly, to recall the multiplication tables, to distinguish between an adjective and an adverb, to name the Presidents. At the same time, teachers have not been spurred by such tests to foster their students' capacities to perform the generative acts of analysis, organization, communication, creativity, and other higher order thinking processes that are the hallmark of a rich, meaning-centered curriculum.

Clearly, managing the transition to a thinking curriculum will entail creating a new assessment system as well. The purpose of Chapter Four is to describe important progress made in this area and to provide a vision of exemplary assessment practice at the elementary level in the 1990s.

SECTION ONE

A Progress Report

California is in the midst of a fundamental revision of its assessment program. The purpose of these changes is to develop an assessment system consistent with the ambitious goals of the thinking curriculum.

Four principles underlying such a system of monitoring student achievement have already begun to emerge. These are: (1) a system that relies largely on exemplary tasks that give information about student performance; (2) a system that uses complex tasks which require marshalling of many learning behaviors coupled with open-ended possibilities in terms of the number of solutions which ultimately lead students to complete coherent work products; (3) a system whose results are formative with the capacity to provide a basis for making decisions about the future learning needs of students as opposed to being used to sort and select students for segregated learning tracks; and (4) a system which provides data usable to the various clients served by public education including parents, other taxpayers, school board members, legislators and, of course, the students themselves.

Assessment of the complex repertoire of learning behaviors called for by the thinking curriculum will be evaluated on the basis of agreed-upon criteria while also relying on the informed professional judgment of teachers.

Assessment of the complex repertoire of learning behaviors called for by the thinking curriculum will be evaluated on the basis of agreed-upon criteria while also relying on the informed professional judgment of teachers.

RECOMMENDATION

21 **Continue building a system of authentic, performance-based assessments that measure the full scope of the thinking curriculum.**

SECTION TWO

Next Steps in Authentic Assessment

California has assumed a pioneering role in the creation of an assessment system that supports the thinking curriculum. To further this work, the Task Force advances three key ideas for implementation as reflected in recommendations 22, 23, and 24.

RECOMMENDATION

22 Define a set of performance standards for the elementary years.

The essence of authentic assessment is that it gives information about student progress in terms of the learning goals schools are trying to foster. The difficulty is that the state has not yet reached agreement concerning what those performance standards should be. The latest generation of curriculum frameworks has done an admirable job of defining expectations for student learning in general terms. However, the frameworks do not—nor should they be expected to—address the question of specific outcomes.

Properly conceived, performance standards—not to be confused with minimum competency levels that all students must attain—would embody California's educational goals in terms of tasks and outcomes. They would allow teachers to discuss student progress with parents and others interested in the effectiveness of the public schools in terms of what students can actually do—using student portfolios, long-term projects, and the results of on-demand performance assessments as concrete illustrations.

Reaching consensus on performance standards is a large undertaking. But it is fundamental to creating a powerful statewide assessment and accountability program.

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RECOMMENDATION

23 Assess limited-English-proficient (LEP) students' performance in the home language.

Current assessment practices in California were not designed with the growing language diversity of the student population in mind. The Elementary Grades Task Force recommends that limited-English-proficient students should be taught, where feasible, in their home language. Equally, the Task Force asserts that the performance of limited-English-proficient students should be assessed in the language in which they are learning.

Accordingly, the Task Force recommends that the state begin the development of other language versions of assessments starting with the largest language groups in the elementary student population.

New types of assessments must be as inventive as the learning outcomes associated with the thinking curriculum. Perhaps no other initiative is likely to have so powerful an impact on the quality of elementary schooling as the reform of assessment and grading practices.

RECOMMENDATION

24 Do not assign letter grades during the primary years.

In general, letter grades shed little light on what teachers and parents most need to know to improve future learning opportunities—namely, the learning strengths and weaknesses of each student. Instead, grades tend to label students and sort and select them into *de facto* learning tracks. Especially at the kindergarten and primary levels, assessment practices that promote rank ordering and diminish the self-esteem of some students should be avoided. In place of letter grades, progressive teachers are learning to monitor student growth in terms of a child's placement on performance scales. At parent conferences, evaluative conversations are based on a review of a collection of the child's work samples.

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CHAPTER 5

Creation of a Learning Environment

Schools are little societies that succeed or fail as they are able to enlist the energy, creativity, and drive of the people who support them in the service of broadly agreed-on educational goals. Low-performing schools that turn themselves around rarely do so as the result of a tremendous influx of new money, outside talent, or patronage. Rather, example after example suggests that schools improve when a core of teachers and concerned parents begin insisting that schools improve and when teachers and parents begin acting as a team to reinforce each other's efforts in delivering a quality education to all students at the school site.

This commitment to excellence—to working together purposefully, respectfully, and trustingly in the pursuit of an agreed-on educational vision—is characteristic of all successful schools. Thus, the research speaks of a pervasive climate of caring and mutual support among staff and students that seems to typify a culture in exemplary schools that affirms important interpersonal and social values by modeling them in action. As abstract as such concepts may seem, they are absolutely critical to supporting the learning and growth of *all* students. The purpose of Chapter Five is to focus on the human dynamics of change at the school site.

SECTION ONE

Important First Steps

RECOMMENDATION

25 Develop a unifying vision of what the school is trying to accomplish.

In successful elementary schools, the staff, parents, and community have over time articulated a common vision of what the school is trying to accomplish. Whatever techniques are used for reaching a consensus and establishing a vision, the most important thing to bear in mind is to keep the process open! The ongoing process of developing a unifying vision helps promote a sense of belonging and community among all those who take part. Staff members feel supported, appreciated, and respected as members of the school team. This feeling, in turn, encourages a continuing willingness to take part in the renewal process.

Whatever techniques are used for reaching a consensus and establishing a vision, the most important thing to bear in mind is to keep the process open! The ongoing process of developing a unifying vision helps promote a sense of belonging and community among all those who take part.

RECOMMENDATION

26 Use the vision of the school as a guide for action.

The power of a clearly stated vision comes when it is used to guide improvements at the school site. Vision statements should be the source of action plans which are dynamic. How then do schools proceed? The Task Force suggests redefining the notion of a school plan. While holding the vision constant, members of the school community should consider as their "improvement plan" the ongoing record of agreements as to next steps to be taken to improve the school. The plan should allow for additions to be inserted as needed.

This type of planning allows flexibility in meeting the needs for change while also allowing all members of the school community to join in the change process at any time.

RECOMMENDATION

27 Bond students to their schools by making them feel part of a caring community.

In exemplary elementary schools children feel a palpable sense of belonging—of being part of a friendly neighborhood of welcoming adults and peers who care about one another's feelings and aspirations and who support one another's social, intellectual, and emotional growth. As examples, schools can promote such a nurturing atmosphere by: (1) providing many different forms of recognition for individual student accomplishments; (2) using the home-language of limited-English-proficient students in "official" settings including school assemblies, newsletters, and other types of communications; and (3) giving students a chance to give back to others through school-sponsored community service activities.

RECOMMENDATION

28 Reach out to parents to solicit their active involvement in the education of their children.

Research regarding the effect of parental involvement on the education of young children is both well-known and unequivocal. Such involvement helps students, particularly those from low-income households, and has a marked positive impact on their achievement. The most important variable in determining whether parents become involved in their children's education is not family size, marital status, or level of education attained; rather, it is the school's program itself. When schools pursue a comprehensive program of involving parents in all facets of the educational endeavor, parents respond enthusiastically and their children benefit greatly.

Examples of successful programs include programs for developing parenting skills; coordinating community health services on behalf of parents; guiding parents on ways to help children learn at home; involving parents in helping roles at school; and soliciting parents to serve as informed decision-makers in governance, advisory, and school advocacy roles.

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A direct way for an elementary school to break down old, inherited psychological barriers of unapproachability is to physically open itself up, before and after regular school hours in order to respond to community needs. From early in the morning until late at night, on weekends and during the summer, the school can be the locus for child care services, community meetings, and continuing education classes—for both students and parents.

The most important way in which parents can support their children's learning is with assistance at home. Consistent with the philosophy of the thinking curriculum, homework is more and more seen as the opportunity for assignments which provide open-ended opportunities for meaningful work that challenges students to think, reason, and apply skills to specific situations. Parents can be helped to play significant roles as their children pursue such types of assignments.

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RECOMMENDATION

29 Systematically upgrade school plants statewide.

School settings must be provided which create an environment conducive to learning—one that is safe and inviting with physical facilities that support the growth of *all* students. While many decisions about maintenance are made elsewhere, a great deal can still be done at the local level. In schools that work, the physical environment is clean, pleasant, and well-maintained. Furniture and space are functional and adaptable to the regrouping of students according to the particular demands of varied learning activities.

The caring school community provides not only for a physical safe haven for students but also for one that is psychologically healthy. Children need to be reassured that their schools guarantee them a safe environment, free from prejudice and harassment, and that their classrooms are inclusive and welcoming and that they celebrate the diversity found among the various members.

CHAPTER 6

Coordinating Student Services

Children have certain physical and emotional needs that must be met before they are free to concern themselves with anything else, including doing well in school. At a minimum, children need to know that food, clothing, and shelter will be provided reliably and that they will be properly cared for when sick. No less eagerly, however, children also seek the validation and emotional support of significant adults in their lives—be it in the form of a word of praise, a few minutes of undivided attention, or a hug.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of children are coming to school without these basic needs having been satisfied. Some neglected children require intensive, immediate help. But being "at-risk" in there stressful times is not a static concept. Virtually every child will experience anxieties and emotional difficulties outside school at some point in his or her upbringing. The purpose of Chapter Six is to map out a coherent strategy for the early recognition and resolution of extracurricular problems, based on a philosophy of risk prevention and on a vision of the schools as a hub for coordinated multi-agency response.

SECTION ONE

The Problem of Fragmentation

The debate over how much responsibility the schools should assume in addressing underlying social problems is a long-standing one. Parallel misgivings have emerged regarding the appropriateness of providing basic health services, psychological counseling, or social services at the school site in an era of limited educational funds.

In their separate spheres, both educators and human service professionals have come to the same conclusion: new alliances must be formed to allow all children to reach their full physical, mental, and emotional potential. The emphasis needs to be on working together and treating the whole child.

The issue of adequate nutrition illustrates the point. Research studies have documented that many American children are malnourished and consume diets that are nutritionally inadequate. Although physical symptoms of malnourished children may not be obvious, such children are likely to demonstrate behavioral abnormalities, such as shortened attention spans and lack of motivation, motor insufficiencies, and diminished sensory integration. Consequently, it is important that schools attempt to do their part in meeting the nutritional needs of our children by providing balanced meals where required through the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program.

The number and extent of physical, emotional, and social problems children bring to school have grown rapidly, but solutions to these problems are slow in coming. It is clear that there must be tighter communication and planning among schools and health care providers. In their separate spheres, both educators and human service professionals have come to the same conclusion: new alliances must be formed to allow all children to reach their full physical, mental, and emotional potential. The emphasis needs to be on working together and treating the whole child.

SECTION TWO

Meeting the Physical and Security Needs of Children

While a holistic approach to solving complex family problems is proving productive in some locales, it will also require state-level leadership so that districts and counties do not have to keep "reinventing the wheel."

This process has already begun. The Healthy Start Support Services for Children Act (Senate Bill 620) is the cornerstone of recent initiatives targeted at prevention and early intervention programs for children in California.

The ultimate goal of SB 620 is the establishment of a comprehensive, statewide system of school-linked services for children and their families. Underlying this ambitious goal is the belief that children who come to school ill, hungry, or neglected are not likely to be active participants in a rigorous curriculum and that the school site is the logical place where services designed to help these students and families should come together.

Because schools are conveniently located and are where at-risk students can be identified, they are the obvious sites for "one-stop shopping" for the special support and programs many students and their families need.

RECOMMENDATION

30 Coordinate human services at the school site to ensure that the basic security needs of children are being met.

Every school district can take three steps to participate in the new collaborative social services approach: (1) provide a setting in which a variety of services can be provided by other governmental and private agencies; (2) designate a coordinator at each school site to be responsible for maintaining linkages with community service providers; the school district's role in this context is

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to make initial contact with human service agencies and other providers and pave the way for more extensive interaction at the school site; and (3) participate in existing efforts to promote the health and welfare of students specifically including such programs as "Healthy Kids, Healthy California," and the "Every Student Succeeds" initiative—both sponsored by the California Department of Education.

Making certain that needy children and their families receive a broad spectrum of prevention-oriented human services is a means to the end of providing a challenging education for every child.

Making certain that needy children and their families receive a broad spectrum of prevention-oriented human services is not a goal in and of itself for schools, but rather a means to the end of providing a challenging education for every child.

CHAPTER

Organizing to Meet the Challenge

Grass roots enthusiasm by itself cannot sustain the progress of educational reform. In his landmark study of the school change process, Michael Fullan found that change initiatives had a fighting chance when they were supported by strong district-level leadership. Without such leadership new programs and practices rarely penetrated beyond the odd classroom or school—and tended to die out completely when the individuals responsible for pushing them switched jobs or left the system.

The previous chapters of *It's Elementary!* have been largely directed at the local school community of teachers, parents, and site administrators. The final chapter is aimed at superintendents, district administrators, and school board members and describes the crucial role they have in improving California's elementary schools.

The New School District

The role of the school district is changing. The old industrial model of district governance put the accent on control and standardization. Centrally planned decisions often determined everything from the length of the school day to what materials would be used in any given classroom. District staff were seen as the enforcers of myriad rules and regulations that emanated from Washington, D.C., Sacramento, and "downtown."

The new model of district governance takes its cues from the effective business literature of the 1980s. Progressive school districts have been changing their administrative approach based on the insight they have gained from the business world. The general thrust of the change—an integral part of the restructuring movement—is to tap the energy and creativity of the professional staff at the school site to achieve outstanding results. Thus, instead of constantly monitoring for compliance with rules and regulations, the district staff's main role is to enable and facilitate—to build up the capacity of people at the school site to reach agreed-on educational goals.

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RECOMMENDATION

31 Enable the local school community to take the problem-solving initiative.

School districts can take several steps to support site-level implementation of the recommendations in this report. They can: (1) jump-start the reform process by announcing to all parties involved that the rules of the educational enterprise have changed—that it is no longer "business as usual;" (2) provide access to knowledge and give guidance and other assistance to teachers struggling to translate curriculum *Frameworks* and model curriculum guides into a daily classroom reality; (3) assure full access to the eight annual professional development days so that teachers may access new knowledge about curriculum and instruction and have time to interact with colleagues; (4) make connections and run interference by coming to the support of local schools that have taken a stand for educational excellence; and (5) grant real, not token autonomy at the school site.

RECOMMENDATION

32 Hold schools accountable for reaching agreed-on outcomes.

Restructuring does not mean "everybody do your own thing." In a school district committed to the ongoing restructuring process, schools are still expected to teach a rigorous thinking curriculum, such as that described by the state curriculum frameworks or in documents issued by leading national groups in the various disciplines. The purpose of restructuring is, after all, to improve student achievement.

Holding schools accountable means district administrators and school board members must accept responsibility for specific tasks including: (1) building support for statewide performance standards that describe what students should know and be able to do in each discipline—standards that are clear, fair, and directly related to desired outcomes; (2) establishing local criteria for success for each school—is sixty percent of the students scoring at the adequate or above level acceptable and if not what is reasonable for next year; for five years hence? (3) making results public by making sure that all who have an interest in the education of children have access to meaningful and understandable information about the achievement levels of individual schools; and (4) intervening in poor performing schools as the intercessor of first resort by taking necessary steps to remedy situations where the prospects for young children point to a foregone conclusion of educational insufficiency.

Holding schools accountable means district administrators and school board members must accept responsibility for a number of specific tasks including intervention in poor performing schools as the intercessor of first resort by taking whatever steps are necessary to remedy situations where the prospects for young children point to a foregone conclusion of educational insufficiency.

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***It's Elementary!* was prepared with the help of a statewide task force composed of teachers, administrators, parents, representatives of school boards and parent groups, and others in the educational community. Members of the task force were appointed by former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bill Honig, whose uncommon vision served as an inspiration to all participants. Deep appreciation is expressed to all who took part in developing *It's Elementary!* which continues to impact elementary education reform statewide and nationally.**

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